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THERE WAS ONCE A HEDGEHOG

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Tap-tap-tap," you hear in the stillness of the night.

Who dares to break the silence before dawn?

The grasshoppers have stopped chirping, the frogs have stopped croaking. The nightingale is silent.

Then, suddenly, you hear the tap-tap-tapping of a slow intrepid tread.

The fox pricks up its ears, wags its tail and disappears into the bushes. The wolf twitches its ear for a moment and continues on its way. The owl takes wing noiselessly and flies off to cast its black shadow deeper in the forest. The beetle gets stuck in the grass and buzzes loudly as it tries to spread its wings.

For a moment the tap-tapping stops. And the poor beetle is crunched between the hedgehog's teeth.



And again, parting the dewy grass, the night wanderer tramps along. It's not difficult to catch up with it, but it will roll up immediately into a ball. If you touch it, you'll prick your finger. It is completely covered with sharp spines.

Till autumn the hedgehog wanders by night in forests, fields and kitchen-gardens. When winter comes, it hides under the roots of a tree, in a bush or a hole, and sleeps till spring, like a bear in its den, covered with dry leaves.

In spring the she-hedgehog builds a cosy nest and gives birth to tiny baby hedgehogs: two, three, sometimes as many as ten! It can happen at any warm time of the year: in May, July or September you can find newborn hedgehogs in the forest.

The father hedgehog lives with the mother hedgehog until the little



ones are born. Then he goes away never to return to his brood, leaving them to their mother's care.

When the mother leaves the nest for a while, she wraps the little ones in grass and leaves. The tiny bundles lie in the nest hidden from the enemy's eyes and warm under their covers.

Before their eyes have opened, the little hedgehogs do not leave their nest. But as soon as they are able to see, they are anxious to go and find out what's going on around them. When they go out for the first time, they cling to one another and keep close behind their mother. If one of them drops behind, it pipes plaintively, "wait, wait for me!" And the mother runs back, looking for her lost baby. She finds it and pushes it with her snout, urging it forward: "don't lag behind!"

For about six weeks the she-hedgehog teaches her prickly babies the ways of the world, and then they wander off all over the forest.



The Tenrec

All hedgehogs are insect-eating mammals. The insectivores, as they are called, include some very different animals: the mole that lives underground, the desman, a water animal valued for its fur, and the shrew, the smallest of them all.

There are twenty different species of hedgehogs. They live in Europe, Asia and Africa.

The tenrecs that live on the island of Madagascar are close relatives of the hedgehog. Some kinds of tenrecs have prickles, while others have not. They only have hair, coarse and bristly.

Some other hedgehogs that inhabit Southern Asia are also without prickles.

There are four kinds of the hedgehog to be found in the Soviet Union.

You probably know the common hedgehog, for you have seen it many times.

The Dahurian hedgehog is found in Siberia.

The "bald" hedgehog lives in Central Asia.

The last two kinds look very much like the common hedgehog, and their habits are very much the same. Only an expert zoologist can tell them apart.

The South of our country is inhabited by long-eared hedgehogs. It's their long ears that distinguish them from other species.

Different hedgehogs have different habits. Some live in forests or in fir or pine woods. They don't like the damp, choosing dry glades and forest edges. Others are found on the steppe, in fields or bushes. And there are mountaineering hedgehogs that prefer fresh alpine air. They live on plateaux, sometimes as high as two thousand metres above sea level. Some hedgehogs like to settle near humans, in farmyards, gardens and barns. These are very trusting and are not afraid of people. But when a hedgehog sees someone, it puffs loudly



The Common Hedgehog



The Dahurian Hedgehog



The Bald Hedgehog



The Long-eared Hedgehog



and rolls up into a ball (not very tight, though) to protect itself with its prickles just in case.

Both in the wild and in captivity, hedgehogs are very fond of milk. Sometimes they wait a long time in the corner of a cowshed: what if a spurt of milk misses the dairymaid's pail? For the hedgehog it is a special treat. When people saw a hedgehog feasting on milk, they used to think that it had milked the cow.





Hedgehogs have a strange habit. Some people say that hedgehogs steal apples. They fix apples to their spines and carry them away. But what do they want apples for? We know that they eat only insects. Why go to all this trouble?

Here is a possible explanation. Zoologists have noticed that hedgehogs are fond of various smells. For instance, they like picking up cigarette butts and try to pin coffee beans on them. The scents of coffee and tobacco attract them. With these the hedgehog disinfects itself, and poisons parasites. And they have many parasites on their skin: fleas, ticks and other insects that torture them terribly, especially ticks.

Perhaps apples also attract hedgehogs with their smell.

Hedgehogs destroy many different pests and slugs. They ruin mouse nests and eat baby mice. But if you think that a hedgehog can catch a big mouse, you are very much mistaken. Mice are too swift and agile for it. The hedgehog won't spare a lizard and can make short work of a snake. Unfortunately, it also destroys birds' nests. It doesn't spare baby hares, frogs and toads either. Which means that hedgehogs also do some harm. But compared with the good they do, it's not too serious. So be kind to the hedgehog.

"Tap-tap-tap," you hear in the stillness of the night.
The grasshoppers have stopped chirping, the frogs stopped croaking and the nightingale is silent.
Only the hedgehog intrepidly tramps through the forest by night.







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